

Stepping In and Stepping Out: Understanding Cultures

Fieldwork is as much about writing as it is about researching. In this chapter you will:

- develop your writing voice for your fieldwork project
- connect your writing with the research process
- understand what an ethnographic perspective is
- start your research portfolio

Ordinary living involves all the skills of fieldworking—looking, listening, collecting, questioning, and interpreting—even though we are not always conscious of these skills. Many of us enjoy people-watching, checking out how others talk, dress, behave, and interact. We question the significance of someone's wearing gold, hooped earrings or displaying a dragon tattoo. We wonder how a certain couple sitting in a restaurant booth can communicate when they don't look each other in the eye. Fieldworkers question such behaviors in a systematic way.

What is a “field”? And how does a person “work” in it? The word *field* carries a wide range of meanings, but for an anthropologist “working in the field” means talking, listening, recording, observing, participating, and sometimes even living in a particular place. The field is the site for doing research, and fieldworking is the process of doing it.

Close looking and listening skills mark trained fieldworkers who study groups of people in contexts—others' and their own. The job of this book is to help you become more conscious as you observe, participate in, and read and write about your own world and the worlds of others. Although we don't claim to turn you into a professional

Long before I ever heard of anthropology, I was being conditioned for the role of stepping in and out of society. It was part of my growing up process to question the traditional values and norms of the family and to experiment with behavior patterns and ideologies. This is not an uncommon process of finding oneself.... Why should a contented and satisfied person think of standing outside his or any other society and studying it?

—HORTENSE POWDERMAKER

ethnographer, we borrow ethnographic strategies to help you become a fieldworker, and we focus on showing you effective ways to write about your process. We'll guide you as you conduct and write up your own fieldwork and as you read about the fieldwork of others. *FieldWorking* will make you consider your everyday experiences in new ways and help you interpret other people's behaviors, languages, and thoughts. But most of all, the fieldwork itself will help you understand why you react and respond in the ways you do. This book will encourage you not only to watch others but also to watch yourself as you watch them.

You've probably spent many hours noticing behavior patterns and questioning routines among the people you've lived with and learned from. In the quotation that introduces this chapter, anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker suggests that as we grow up, we "step out" a bit; we "adopt the outsider stance" as we watch the people inside our own group. We also "step in" to unfamiliar groups and examine them closely, which is the fieldworker's "insider stance." As

insiders, we wonder if there might be a better technique for mincing garlic or cooling pies that is less laborious than our family's method. As outsiders moving to a new school, we might question the ritual cheers aimed against the rival or different rules for submitting papers. When we visit another country, we need to learn new rules for introductions and farewells in order to behave appropriately. When we volunteer as part of a community service program, we need to find a way

to conform to the routines we notice rather than challenge them. Fieldworkers study the customs of groups of people in the spaces they inhabit.

Inquiry into the behavior patterns of others prepares us for doing fieldwork. Powdermaker also asks why any "satisfied and contented person" would want to research everyday ways of behaving, talking, and interacting. One answer is that fieldworking sharpens our abilities to look closely at surroundings. People, places, languages, and behaviors can be familiar because we've lived with them, but when we move or travel and find ourselves strangers, the very same things can be unfamiliar or uncomfortable. Another answer is that knowing our assumptions and recognizing our stereotypes help develop tolerance and respect for customs and groups different from ours. For example, head coverings—turbans, veils, yarmulkes, ceremonial headdresses, and even baseball caps worn backward—may seem strange to us until we understand their history and significance. Studying and writing about diverse people and cultures does not necessarily make us accept difference, but it can make us aware of our assumptions and sometimes even of our prejudices.

Defining Culture: Fieldwork and Ethnography

Culture is a slippery term. To some people, it implies "high culture"—classical music, etiquette, museum art, or extensive knowledge of Western history. But fieldworkers know that every group has a culture, so there is no useful

distinction between "high" and "low" cultures. Anthropologists have tried to define what culture is for as long as they've been thinking about it, and they have developed contrasting definitions.

We define ~~culture as an~~ invisible web of behaviors, patterns, rules, and rituals of a group of people who have contact with one another and share a common language. Our definition draws from the work of many anthropologists:

Some Definitions of Culture

- "Culture is local and manmade and hugely variable. It tends also to be integrated. A culture, like an individual, is a more or less consistent pattern of thought and action" (Benedict 46).
- "A society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members.... [I]t does not consist of things, people, behavior, or emotions. It is rather an organization of those things" (Goodenough 167).
- "Cultures are, after all, collective, untidy assemblages, authenticated by belief and agreement" (Myerhoff 10).
- "Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance which he himself has created. I take culture to be those webs" (Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures* 14).

Cultural theorist Raymond Williams writes that *culture* is one of the most difficult words to define, and these anthropologists' definitions illustrate this. As you can see, definitions of culture can be both metaphorical ("webs") and structured (patterns of belief and behavior as well as untidy deviations from those patterns).

In your fieldworking experiences, you will be constantly asking yourself, ~~What is the culture?~~ of the group you are investigating. The goal of fieldworking is to find it. You will find evidence in the language of the group you study, in its cultural artifacts, or in its rituals and behaviors. Fieldworkers investigate the cultural landscape, the larger picture of how a culture functions: its rituals, its rules, its traditions, and its behaviors. And they poke around the edges at the stories people tell, the items people collect and value, and the materials people use to go about their daily living. By learning from people in a culture what it ~~is like to be part of their world~~, fieldworkers discover a culture's way of being, knowing, and understanding.

Fieldworkers who live, observe, and describe the daily life, behaviors, and language of a group of people for long periods of time are called ~~ethnographers~~.

Refer to the glossary at the back of this book, or online at bedfordstmartins.com/fieldworking, for help with terms specific to fieldworking.

This book draws on the work of a wide range of classic and contemporary anthropologists and folklorists. ~~It is not only the written product of their work, but a researched study that synthesizes information about the life of a people or group.~~ Researchers in many disciplines rely on ethnographic methods: anthropologists, folklorists, linguists, sociologists, oral historians, and those who study popular culture. Ethnographic researchers conduct fieldwork in an attempt to understand the cultures they study. And as they study the culture of others, they learn patterns that connect with their own lives and traditions.

Fieldworkers historically studied foreign or exotic cultures and occasionally judged these other cultures to be less sophisticated or developed than their own. Fieldworkers of all backgrounds must guard against this attitude of **colonization**. Contemporary fieldworkers no longer restrict their research to non-Western cultures. But all fieldworkers, even those who investigate local cultures and subcultures, ~~risk projecting their own assumptions onto the groups they study.~~ They must be ready and willing to ~~unpack their own~~ **cultural baggage** and embark on a collaborative journey with those they study.

Stepping In: Revealing Our Subcultures

As coauthors of this book, we have ourselves come to our interest in ethnography from membership in a dizzying array of **subcultures**. As collaborators, we share the culture of academia. We are graduates of the same Ph.D. program in which we learned to conduct ethnographic fieldwork. As middle-aged professors, we've both taught in public urban, suburban, and rural schools; directed college writing centers and programs; and taught many college English and education courses. And as mothers of young adults, both of us have spent years navigating the child-centered cultures of nursery school carpools, pediatric waiting rooms, and soccer and Special Olympics teams.

In each of these subcultures, we communicated through special languages with insiders. We knew the ways of behaving and interacting, and we shared belief systems with the others in each group. Yet we held membership in many subcultures at the same time, and we could move among them. As members over the years, we were unaware of those groups as actual cultures, but looking back as fieldworkers, we now understand that we, like you, have always been in a position to research the people around us. And we don't always need to go very far from home to find groups of people whose ways of behaving and communicating are different and interesting, yet unfamiliar to us.

As you begin to think about conducting field research projects, review your own subcultures; you may find that they offer intriguing possibilities for research.

Looking at Subcultures

PURPOSE

We consider any self-identified group of people who share language, stories, rituals, behaviors, and values a subculture. Some subcultures define themselves by geography (southerners, Texans, New Yorkers). Others define themselves by ethnicity or language (Mexicano, Irish, Belgian, Filipino, Ghanaian). And others define their interests by shared rituals and behaviors (fraternities, Girl Scouts, Masons, Daughters of the American Revolution, computer hackers). Whether it's your bowling league, your neighborhood pickup basketball team or group of bicycle freestylers, your church, your community government, or your school's ecology club, you simultaneously belong to many different subcultures. With this box, we'd like you to recall your subculture affiliations and share them with others in your class.

ACTION

List some of the subcultures to which you belong. For each subculture you mention, jot down a few key details that distinguish the group—behaviors, insider phrases, rules, rituals, and the specific locations where these behaviors usually occur. You might want to divide your list into a few categories or columns, such as

Group

Rituals

Insider Phrases

Behaviors

Write a paragraph or short essay describing one of these subcultures, either seriously or satirically.

RESPONSE

Some of our students have belonged to these subcultures: computer interest groups, online discussion groups, listservs, deer hunters, gospel singers, specialty book clubs, volleyball teams, science fiction conventioners, auctiongoers, fly fishermen, billiard players, bull riders, lap swimmers, bluegrass musicians, stock car racers.

Chinatsu Sazawa is a native of Japan, where as a teenager she experienced karaoke quite differently from the way Americans do. Here is what she writes about the subculture of Japanese karaoke participants:

The Karaoke Box is a small soundproof room with a karaoke machine, a table, and sofas. Customers can reserve it for \$5 to \$20 an hour and sing as much as they like. This habit is to weekend Karaoke Box warriors as a sports gym is to exercise lovers. We enjoy karaoke and perform extensively to release our stress by singing, shouting, and dancing. The most important thing for weekend Karaoke Box warriors is to be efficient at the Box. Paying by the hour, we do our best to sing as many songs as possible. As we enter the Karaoke Box, we go directly to a remote control and the book listing the available songs. While we take off our jackets and put our bags down, we check "the code" of our opening song and punch in the number on the remote. During the one minute while the machine searches for the song,

BOX 1 continued

we prepare to sing, taking off the sanitary plastic covering on the microphone and connecting it to the machine. We adjust the key of the song by pressing the Key Changer button.

It is an understood rule among us that we take turns and sing only one song each turn. It's also a courtesy to avoid singing too many long songs (songs that would last over five minutes, such as "Hotel California"). While others are singing, instead of listening we constantly flip the pages of the book of available songs and select the songs we will sing in our following turns. It's important to punch in the code numbers before the other people's songs end so that the next song starts immediately without down time. We even press the Stop Performance button just as the song begins its ending.

We talk very little in the Box except to ask questions like "Whose song is that?" or say "That was good!" Seven or eight minutes before our time expires, we receive a phone call from the front desk. That's the cue to punch in the number of our closing songs. We often select closing songs that everyone in the room can sing together. While the last person is singing, the rest of the people clean up the room—pile the books of available songs, place the mikes on the table, throw garbage in the bin—and get ready to leave. When we pass the front desk, we look for discount coupons for our next visit.

Investigating Perspectives: Insider and Outsider

Fieldworkers realize that ordinary events in one culture might seem extraordinary in another. When people say "that's really weird" or "aren't they strange," a fieldworker hears these comments as signals for investigation. When you first ate dinner at someone's home other than yours, you may have felt like an outsider. You stepped out of your own home and stepped in to a set of routines and rituals different from your own. You may have noticed who set the table, passed the food, served, ate first, talked, signaled that the meal was over, cleared off the table, and washed the dishes. Or as an insider among your own relatives, you may have always observed their quirky behaviors. To avoid a head cold, your mother may use crystals and a spiritual chant, but your best friend's mother may depend on echinacea and vitamin C.

Although we would not classify modern families as subcultures, they do have some of the features of a subculture and prepare us to observe outside our own home territory. When you visit another place, you may notice that people move and talk more slowly or quickly, more quietly or noisily, or that they use space differently than you're used to. A fieldworker steps out to adopt

an outsider's perspective when investigating unfamiliar (or even familiar) patterns, attempting to unveil the many layers of behaviors and beliefs that make people think as they think and act as they act.

Anthropologist Renato Rosaldo offers a good example of ~~stepping out, using the outsider's detached perspective to look at a familiar routine~~, the family ritual of making breakfast:

Every morning, the reigning patriarch, as if in from the hunt, shouts from the kitchen, "How many people would like a poached egg?" Women and children take turns saying yes or no.

In the meantime, the women talk among themselves and designate one among them the toastmaker. As the eggs near readiness, the reigning patriarch calls out to the designated toastmaker, "The eggs are about ready. Is there enough toast?"

"Yes" comes the deferential reply. "The last two pieces are about to pop up." The reigning patriarch then proudly enters, bearing a plate of poached eggs before him. Throughout the course of the meal, the women and children, including the designated toastmaker, perform the obligatory ritual praise song, saying, "These sure are great eggs, Dad." (47)

With his ~~detached language~~ and his careful detailing of their routine, Rosaldo depicts this North American middle-class family as if it were part of a different tribe or culture. He uses his interpretive skills as an ethnographer to create a **parody**—in jest and fun—to allow his family to see themselves as an outsider might describe them.

But fieldworkers do not depend entirely on the detachment or objectivity that comes from stepping out of a culture. They rely on ~~basic human involvement~~—their gut reactions or subjective responses to cultural practices—as well. In another example from Rosaldo's fieldwork, he shows how his own personal life experience shaped his ability to understand headhunters. As a ritual of revenge and grief over a deceased relative, the Ilongots of the Philippines sever human heads. When Rosaldo and his anthropologist wife, Michelle, lived and studied among the Ilongot people for several years, they were unable to understand the complex emotions surrounding headhunting. But after Michelle died in an accident during fieldwork, Rosaldo began to understand the headhunters' practice of killing for retribution. It was his own experience—rage and grief over his wife's death—that allowed him insight into the cultural practice of the people he was studying. Even though their value systems were different, Rosaldo and the Ilongots shared the basic human response to a loved one's death.

So it is not always ~~detachment~~ that allows us to study culture, our own or that of others. **Subjectivity**—our inner feelings and beliefs—allows us to uncover some features of culture that are not always apparent. As a fieldworker, you will conduct an internal dialogue between your subjective and objective selves, listening to both, questioning both. You combine

the viewpoints of an outsider stepping in and an insider stepping out of the culture you study. And studying culture is as much about the everyday practices of cooking and eating, such as poaching eggs, as it is about the unfamiliar tribal practices of killing as a part of grieving. Detachment and involvement, subjectivity and objectivity, insider and outsider stances are equally coupled in fieldworking.

Stepping Out: Making the Familiar Strange and the Strange Familiar

What is often more difficult to achieve than making the unknown become familiar is ~~making the familiar seem strange~~. Rosaldo was able to accomplish the outsider view of his family's breakfast-making practices mainly through satire, a technique that distances the reader from the event or practice under consideration. In the following reading written in 1956, "Body Ritual among the Nacirema," anthropologist Horace Miner also depends on satire to depict an ordinary set of daily practices as strange and unfamiliar. As you read this essay, try to figure out what everyday rituals Miner is satirizing.

Body Ritual among the Nacirema

Horace Miner

The anthropologist has become so familiar with the diversity of ways in which different peoples behave in similar situations that he is not apt to be surprised by even the most exotic customs. In fact, if all of the logically possible combinations of behavior have not been found somewhere in the world, he is apt to suspect that they must be present in some yet undescribed tribe. This point has, in fact, been expressed with respect to clan organization by Murdock (71). In this light, the magical beliefs and practices of the Nacirema present such unusual aspects that it seems desirable to describe them as an example of the extremes to which human behavior can go.

Professor Linton first brought the ritual of the Nacirema to the attention of anthropologists twenty years ago (326), but the culture of this people is still very poorly understood. They are a North American group living in the territory between the Canadian Cree, the Yaqui and Tarahumare of Mexico, and the Carib and Arawak of the Antilles. Little is known of their origin, although tradition states that they came from the east. According to Nacirema mythology, their nation was originated by a culture hero, Notgnihsaw, who is otherwise known for two great feats of strength—the throwing of a piece of wampum across the river Pa-To-Mac and the chopping down of a cherry tree in which the Spirit of Truth resided.

Nacirema culture is characterized by a highly developed market economy which has evolved in a rich natural habitat. While much of the people's time is devoted to economic pursuits, a large part of the fruits of these labors and a considerable portion of the day are spent in ritual activity. The focus of this activity is the human body, the appearance and health of which loom as a dominant concern in the ethos of the people. While such a concern is certainly not unusual, its ceremonial aspect and associated philosophy are unique.

The fundamental belief underlying the whole system appears to be that the human body is ugly and that its natural tendency is to debility and disease. Incarcerated in such a body, man's only hope is to avert these characteristics through the use of the powerful influences of ritual and ceremony. Every household has one or more shrines devoted to this purpose. The more powerful individuals in the society have several shrines in their houses and, in fact, the opulence of a house is often referred to in terms of the number of such ritual centers it possesses. Most houses are of wattle and daub construction, but the shrine rooms of the more wealthy are walled with stone. Poorer families imitate the rich by applying pottery plaques to their shrine walls.

While each family has at least one such shrine, the rituals associated with it are not family ceremonies but are private and secret. The rites are normally only discussed with children, and then only during the period when they are being initiated into these mysteries. I was able, however, to establish sufficient rapport with the natives to examine these shrines and to have the rituals described to me.

The focal point of the shrine is a box or chest which is built into the wall. In this chest are kept the many charms and magical potions without which no native believes he could live. These preparations are secured from a variety of specialized practitioners. The most powerful of these are the medicine men, whose assistance must be rewarded with substantial gifts. However, the medicine men do not provide the curative potions for their clients, but decide what the ingredients should be and then write them down in an ancient and secret language. This writing is understood only by the medicine men and by the herbalists who, for another gift, provide the required charm.

The charm is not disposed of after it has served its purpose, but is placed in the charm-box of the household shrine. As these magical materials are specific for certain ills, and the real or imagined maladies of the people are many, the charm-box is usually full to overflowing. The magical packets are so numerous that people forget what their purposes were and fear to use them again. While the natives are very vague on this point, we can only assume that the idea in retaining all the old magical materials is that their presence in the charm-box, before which the body rituals are conducted, will in some way protect the worshipper.

Beneath the charm-box is a small font. Each day every member of the family, in succession, enters the shrine room, bows his head before the charm-box, mingles different sorts of holy water in the font, and proceeds with a brief rite of ablution. The holy waters are secured from the Water Temple of the community, where the priests conduct elaborate ceremonies to make the liquid ritually pure.